



## ONLINE TEACHING AND LEARNING TALKING POINTS

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This document was created by the University of Massachusetts Amherst Faculty Senate Ad Hoc Committee on Online Learning during the 2006-2007 academic year. Our intention is to provide background information about online teaching and learning to those considering teaching online for the first time. Herein we highlight strengths, acknowledge challenges, and address common concerns about this teaching mode.

## STRENGTHS

Learning management systems allow for more diverse approaches to content delivery and assessment. Students can be more active in an online learning environment than in a traditional classroom. For instance, students can be given a reading assignment followed by a short quiz. Upon successful completion of the quiz, a video lecture can be released to the student that asks them to stop the lecture, search for materials online (e.g., websites, library resources) and then continue the lecture. Students may also be asked to conduct online research and then use the information they have gathered to participate in an online discussion with their classmates or make an online presentation to the class. Finally, the OWL assessment tool gives students an opportunity to practice problems, get immediate feedback (with explanations), and retake the assessment with slightly modified problems. These examples also demonstrate how face-to-face courses can be augmented with online components.

### Online discussions are often richer than face-to-face discussions.

Instructors who have moderated online discussions agree that the quality of these discussions is noticeably superior to face-to-face discussions. Three possible reasons may account for this result. First, online discussions can be designed to encourage more depth and unanimity of discussions than in traditional classroom setting, thereby increasing the engagement of students and faculty. Second, students may be more fully prepared to participate in an online discussion because they have the opportunity to review their thoughts and edit their words before engaging in the discussion. Third, online discussions can equalize participation across all students.

### Online tools help keep students current with course material.

Quizzes, or other assignments, designed into every learning module keep students on task and up-to-date. Quizzing, in particular, is less disruptive to the course when administered online because finite class time does not have to be used for distribution, completion, and collection activities. Moreover, online quizzes can be created to provide immediate feedback to the students (versus waiting until the next class period (or more) for their results).

### Peer-to-peer learning is enhanced through online discussions and working groups.

Students often help, correct, and teach each other in online classrooms. They provide great examples and answer questions using different words than the instructor. Their alternative perspectives may be the key to helping their fellow students understand a new concept. Also, creating groups in an online classroom provides students, particularly those in 100% online courses, with a sense of community. They become a collective that help each other learn the material and share the class experience.

### Learning management systems offer a broad range of assessment options.

Learning management systems can be used to administer more types and more instances of assessment than may be practical in a traditional classroom setting that is limited to 150 minutes of class time per week. In addition, students can use resources while completing assessment, which more closely mirrors real life decision making.

### Course material can be tailored to fit varying needs of students.

Classes may be tailored online to provide specific information for subsections of a course. For example, an accounting course made up of students from sports management and hospitality and tourism management could be given the same introductory lecture, but directed to different examples that are relevant to their particular fields of interest.

### Learning management systems facilitate group work.

Group work is easily facilitated by learning management systems. Instructors can create private chat rooms and discussion areas for groups. Students can use these tools to facilitate their interactions. For instances, they can post documents, discuss assignments asynchronously, or set up times to chat. They can also submit group assignments and be assessed as a group.

### Online education provides greater access to the university.

Adult students with families and work schedules have greater access to the university when online course options are available. For instance, child care providers can continue in school even while raising a family and working students who travel need not miss class because of a business trip. Students forced to leave campus before completing coursework because of work, family, or military obligations can finish their degrees in a timely manner from distant locations. Faculty members are provided greater access also as they can continue to teach while on assignment elsewhere. UMass becomes available to those beyond the Amherst area; indeed, beyond Massachusetts or even the United States.

### Online courses make it possible to identify weaker students sooner.

Because of required participation (e.g., required weekly threaded discussion postings) students experiencing difficulties will become apparent well before a midterm exam, or major writing assignment, is due. The instructor can provide immediate assistance while there is still ample time for improvement.

## CHALLENGES

### Platforms are changing regularly.

While this statement is true, these constant changes reflect the improvements to learning management systems that create new functionality or enhance existing functionality. The time lost when these transitions occur can be minimized by designing content that is portable. For example, instead of creating assignments in the learning management system, an instructor can create them in MS Word or the like. When the learning management system changes, these files can be migrated more easily to the new system than files created in the old system.

### Preparing the learning management system for an online course is labor intensive.

Teaching online for the first time takes a fairly large commitment of time and energy. Instructors must learn to navigate the learning management system, decide which tools are most appropriate for their course content, and make sure that the investment in the chosen technology makes sense in terms of the real gains in student learning.

### Learning management systems are always available.

While students may find the availability of materials and discussions much more convenient, using online tools to augment or teach a course can mean more contact time between instructors and students outside of the normal class time. While this unlimited availability may be daunting to instructors, student expectations can be managed. For example, an instructor can post the minimum frequency that s/he plans to access the online course content.

### Ramping up 100% online courses at the start of the semester takes longer than ramping up traditional courses.

The online course calendar mirrors the traditional course calendar with respect to administrative deadlines, etc. Students who add the class on the last day of the two week add period will have to wait 1-3 days for course access and then another 3-7 days for their textbooks. With this schedule, students are unable to fully participate in the course for the first three weeks. For classes with early assignments and/or group work, this late entry poses scheduling difficulties.

## COMMON CONCERNS

### Weaker students will be lost online.

Reaching and connecting successfully with weaker students may be more difficult in an online setting. Without the face-to-face support structure that a traditional classroom provides, these students may become isolated, fall behind on the material, or worse, operate in denial mode by not logging into the course. While these scenarios are possible, instructors can create their courses in such a way that these situations can be minimized. For example, students can easily be contacted within the learning management system and encouraged to catch up. Using the learning management system in this manner may seem less intrusive to the student than using home e-mail accounts or telephoning (these more intrusive methods can still be used if the course mail does not work). By assigning students to groups, they can establish a sense of community in the course and get to know a few of their classmates. Finally, discussions may help the weaker students become stronger because they must deal with the challenge of putting thoughts into writing rather than sitting quietly in the back of the class, thereby strengthening their thinking skills.

### Online teaching does not fit my teaching style.

Courses with significant online components are reaching into entirely new areas of teaching and learning that rely less on presentation, lecturing and listening skills. These new areas may be less defined and tested, but they have great potential to reach students who have not been accessed through traditional methods. With the vast array of tools available in learning management systems, even instructors who enjoy the performance art of teaching may find some that can augment their performance. Indeed, face-to-face teaching may be augmented by online tools (e.g., posting grades and/or solutions, moderating online discussions) resulting in a spectrum of teaching opportunities ranging from 100% online to 100% face-to-face, with more and more courses falling between the two extremes.

### Learning management systems cannot be tailored to fit my course content.

Transitioning hands-on, inquiry-based learning to an online environment may represent the area where the applicability of online learning is most questioned. Even self-proclaimed skeptics about online education, however, are becoming convinced that this type of learning can be adapted online. By providing some materials, having students obtain others, providing directions and assembling good teams, students can try experiments, complete investigations, and prepare group presentations online. Conducting these types of courses online is not easy since a great deal of the front-end loading is required to set the process in motion, but this activity is necessary for any laboratory-type activity.

Instructors cannot get visual affirmation that students understand the material.

An online discussion can be a better source of information about student comprehension than anything in the classroom. Shy students who might be reluctant to speak, particularly in a large lecture, are much more forthcoming when they can write their questions and comments.

Exams are impossible because students can easily cheat.

Increasing the types and instances of assessments reduces the risk of academic dishonesty. The best online exams are those that test understanding and application of knowledge rather than fact recall, since enforcing a closed-note, closed-book exam is virtually impossible (pun intended). Moreover, these exams are often a better fit with course goals than more traditional exam formats. Also, quizzes and tests can be constructed to be different from student to student, as well as from semester to semester. Other forms of assessment, such as papers or essay exams, can be scanned by plagiarism checkers.

Instructors are not involved with students as closely as in a face-to-face setting.

For some students, this statement is indeed true. For fully online courses, an instructor may never correspond with a student beyond the course requirements. In other cases, however, some students thrive in this environment and the instructor has more opportunities to interact one-on-one than s/he would have in a traditional setting. For example, when an instructor provides feedback to threaded discussion postings, an exchange may ensue that continues the discussion. As with face-to-face setting, interaction varies depending on the student.

Online teaching and learning is less efficient than conventional methods.

From an instructor's perspective this statement may be true, particularly the first time teaching an online course. Instructors must formalize lessons because they cannot be augmented during class periods as easily as responding to a student's question or remembering a point that s/he wants to make that is not included in her/his notes. Subsequent semesters, however, are more efficient because the class preparation is completed except for the routine updates of materials that correspond with the updates one would make for traditional classes. Another aspect of online teaching that may seem inefficient is the 24/7 access to the course. For this reason, online teaching is more difficult to compartmentalize for some instructors than traditional teaching.

From the student's perspective, online learning may be more efficient because class time can be scheduled at the student's convenience and the commuting time to campus is saved. These savings are particularly critical for non-traditional students.

Learning management systems cannot address the learning style differences of students.

The array of tools available within a learning management system may in fact allow for better attention to the various learning styles represented in a class.

The teaching assistant role is unclear in online teaching.

In some cases this statement is true. Online teaching, however, provides an opportunity to clarify the respective roles of the instructor and teaching assistant through both conversation and the access granted to the teaching assistant within the learning management system.